

african-american studies  
for the new century

# RACE

## CONSCIOUSNESS

Edited by Judith Jackson Fossett and Jeffrey A. Tucker

# **RACE CONSCIOUSNESS**

AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDIES FOR THE NEW CENTURY

Edited by  
JUDITH JACKSON FOSSETT  
and JEFFREY A. TUCKER

With a Foreword by  
NELL IRVIN PAINTER  
and ARNOLD RAMPERSAD

and an Introduction by  
ROBIN D. G. KELLEY



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MARGARET ROSE VENDRYES

**HANGING ON THEIR WALLS**  
**AN ART COMMENTARY ON LYNCHING,**  
**THE FORGOTTEN 1935 ART EXHIBITION**

Countless art exhibitions have been held in New York City in any given year since the second decade of the twentieth century, when the metropolis began to claim its place as art capital of the world. But before 1935, no gallery had hosted an exhibition specific to issues concerning African-American men. With the opening of *An Art Commentary on Lynching* that year, art became, for the first time, an experimental vehicle for countering negative attitudes toward black men. An orchestrated effort of this caliber would not be seen again in New York City until 1994, when the Whitney Museum of American Art hosted *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary Art*. Well over half a century after *An Art Commentary*, several works in the Whitney exhibition reflected the persistence and pertinence of lynching as a theme relevant to black

men even though literal lynching had been obliterated. Lynching's manifestations in American visual art began with one man's brainstorm in 1934. What was intended as an overt yet measured method of popularizing the protest of lynching (overt because the purpose was deliberate and political; measured because under the protection of the "fine art" label, the volatile topic became tempered for public consumption) inspired the creation of objects reflecting an unequaled variety of attitudes toward African-American men and the race conflicts in which they figured.

*An Art Commentary on Lynching* took place at the Arthur U. Newton Galleries on East 57th Street in New York City; it opened on February 15, 1935, and ran for two weeks (see catalog cover, figure 1). The number of visitors far exceeded expectations. This was due, in part, to the last-minute cancellation of the exhibition by its original host, Jacques Seligmann Galleries. The cancellation served to stir up public interest in these art objects that had caused the owner concern about "keep[ing] the galleries free of political or racial manifestations."<sup>1</sup> One hundred eighty-three patrons allowed their names to be listed in the exhibition's catalog as evidence of tangible support. This display of visual art was assembled specifically to draw attention to the need for a nationwide antilynching law under the sponsorship of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the College Art Association.<sup>2</sup>

Although efforts were made to intellectualize the cause and effects of lynching in order to inspire support for *An Art Commentary*, African-American fears of white retribution and the white "tendency to translate [white] barbarisms and deceptions into virtues" came through loud and clear in the art.<sup>3</sup> The 1930s had witnessed an increase in incidents of mob violence against African Americans in the South after a significant decrease since the turn of the century. Increased visibility of blacks in the workplace made possible by New Deal legislation seemed to inspire a resurgence of violence, historically the most virulent form of racial oppression. *Lynchings and What They Mean: General Findings of the Southern Commission on the Study of Lynching*, published in 1931, offered a contemporary look at the state of this issue. In sober and frank language, this thin publication presented data ranging from historical statistics to candid descriptions of lyncher types and techniques.

The commission concluded that "We expect lynchings ultimately to be eradicated by the growth of a healthy public opinion that will no longer tolerate them."<sup>4</sup> Walter White, then director of the NAACP, tirelessly and with steadily increasing militancy investigated methods of promoting the protest of lynching. The operations of the NAACP gained urgency in 1934, when the Costigan-Wagner bill was under consideration by the new Congress.<sup>5</sup> Using various procedures aimed at the typical urban art gallery visitor, White led a city-

## AN ART COMMENTARY ON LYNCHING



THE FUGITIVE  
by John Steuart Curry

Arthur U. Newton Galleries  
Eleven East Fifty-seventh Street  
New York City

February 15 — March 2, 1935

Galleries open 10:00 A.M. to  
5:00 P.M. daily, except Sunday

Price of Catalogue: Twenty-five Cents

**Figure 1.** Catalog cover for *An Art Commentary on Lynching*. Hale Woodruff Papers, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana.



centered campaign to uncover the lynch mobs' covert practices.<sup>6</sup> The effectiveness of visual material slowly began to take hold. The earliest method was advertising in national magazines, using texts emphasizing the hypocrisy of the American Constitution as it related to African Americans accompanied by rather explicit photographs of actual lynchings. Another was to hang a black flag from the NAACP New York office window announcing each incident, which read, A MAN WAS LYNCHED YESTERDAY. In 1935 alone, the flag appeared twenty times. Several major magazines published even more gruesome photographs, planting a visual image of the practice in the American mind.

In 1935, those concerned about lynching considered the practice to be primarily a result of ignorance and economic oppression.<sup>7</sup> At the time, lynchings were not critiqued as cultural phenomena in light of the urgency of the need to condemn their continued occurrence. However, Walter White candidly identified lynching as one in a line of American "folk-ways."<sup>8</sup> Today, the distance of sixty years allows for an involved analysis of the exhibit that probes beneath lynching's surface manifestations.

Although the depiction of violence and torture in western art dates back to antiquity, its blatant use as a theme in American art had been almost exclusively propagandistic or pornographic. These two contradictory aims collided in the artistic expression of lynching. The art objects discussed here are telling displays of the important roles perspective and the artist's position play in visualizing a social theme.

Thirty-eight artists submitted their work to *An Art Commentary*.<sup>9</sup> Of this number, one woman, Peggy Bacon, and ten African Americans were represented. Given the premise of the exhibition, those who participated were undoubtedly considered radicals. Although this was a blatant call for artists to apply their talents to realize White's aim to "delicately . . . effect a union of art and propaganda," the resulting objects reveal an unanticipated diversity of approach to the subject of lynching.<sup>10</sup> With the exception of Peggy Bacon's caricatures of two notorious hanging judges, *An Art Commentary* was a display of what *men* thought about *men's* deeds. The exhibition, therefore, represents what Robyn Wiegman refers to as a "culturally complex relation between black men and white men and their claims to the patriarchal province of masculine power."<sup>11</sup> The race, class, religion, gender, and sexual orientation of the artist often play a pivotal role in the handling of subject matter in general. But a theme as loaded with social and political significance as lynching tended to exaggerate the artist's expression of self-involvement. Analysis of the art must rightly take into account the background of the artist to enable the most thorough extraction of meaning possible. Hence, an African American's opinion about lynching will understandably contain an autobiographical tone, because as Pearl Buck made clear in her

opening address for the exhibition, every black man was a potential victim of the lynch mob.<sup>12</sup> During the years of its use, lynching without a doubt inspired fear in all African Americans, but especially the men. Further, this collection of art serves as an example of lynching's later perpetuation by artists' critiquing broader notions of African-American masculinity and sexuality, issues that were always present in American art.

Several of the works displayed in *An Art Commentary* did not survive. Many have gone the way of cultural ephemera, failing the test of time given to objects of fine art. American art containing sociopolitical commentary during the early twentieth century was closely tied to the graphic media favored by newspapers and magazines.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, many of the *Art Commentary* entries were in black and white media: lithographs, drawings, and cartoons. The paintings and sculptures submitted to the exhibition were, for the most part, larger and more elaborate pieces created prior to the announcement of White's exhibition. These independently conceived objects in particular reveal an interest in the depiction of this macabre practice by celebrated artists as different in temperament as Isamu Noguchi and Thomas Hart Benton.

Noguchi, needing a model, used a photograph published in 1930 for his metal sculpture, *Death (Lynched Figure)* (figure 2). The violence of this subject was considered so uncharacteristic of Noguchi that his biographers have assumed it was created exclusively for *An Art Commentary*.<sup>14</sup> Although the sculptor did approach White for help in finding an appropriate photograph, the idea to depict a lynching was Noguchi's alone. Noguchi, born in Los Angeles and raised in Japan, occasionally faced overt racism from his white American critics. Henry McBride called *Death* "just a little Japanese mistake"; he found Noguchi's adept use of abstraction and figuration to comment on American barbarism irritating at best.<sup>15</sup> Without specific reference to Noguchi, *Art News* pointed out the "strong atmosphere of sensationalism" and "a sort of aesthetic opportunism in capitalization on the dramatic values of the subject" at hand in *An Art Commentary* and finally judged *Death* in that context as "closely approaching the bizarre."<sup>16</sup>

Noguchi's participation in the NAACP exhibition was a feather in the organization's cap. By 1935, he had already enjoyed twelve one-man exhibitions. Noguchi's professed interest in communist issues figured into the criticism of his art. As a humanitarian, he was perhaps expected to be less abstract in his handling of lynching. According to Matthew Baigell, "Noguchi has wanted his materials to express themselves through their textures and physical properties as well as to imply meanings suggested by the configurations of their forms."<sup>17</sup> Slightly smaller than life size, the seamless, faceless metal figure, suspended by actual rope, was frozen in an impossible position that implied struggle when



**Figure 2.** Isamu Noguchi, *Death (Lynched Figure)*, 1934, Monel metal, rope, 39 x 29¼ x 21 inches, (base not included). Photograph by Bernice Abbott/Commerce Graphics Ltd., Inc.

struggle would have been futile. The idea of violent death was alive and glistening (as a black body would be over flames or under the lash), attracting even the unwilling viewer, who became a witness to the crime in its presence. Embracing what the eye encountered, this powerful work of art effortlessly

dominated the Newton Galleries. Within four days of *An Art Commentary's* opening, Noguchi, perhaps angry at the omission of his name in the catalog or fed up with the tone of the recent criticism of his work, removed *Death* from Newton Galleries without explanation.<sup>18</sup>

Although Thomas Hart Benton's painting, *A Lynching* (see figure 3), came out of the Midwest Regionalist tradition characterized by a somewhat literal and documentary style; it nevertheless had an uncanny similarity to Noguchi's work. Benton became celebrated as an artist who found optimism in the life of those Americans who continued working the soil. He approached the subject of lynching with similar zeal, picturing able American men at work. Although wielding a log against a jailhouse door, Benton's figures could just as easily have been collaborating to build it. Both artists chose an awkwardly animated pose for the lynched figure, highlighting the morbidity of the victim's final breath—a plastic suspension of life that exaggerated the inevitability of death. Noguchi and Benton also found the appeal of placing the event in an urban-inspired environment more effective than the allusion to the backwoods common to other works. The telephone pole in Benton's picture, from which the hanging body is suspended, brings home the irony of civilization still accommodating savagery. Benton carefully composed his painting with expert use of lights and darks, adding a frenzied rhythm to the scene. Art executed with skill and attention to detail—aspects celebrated in most contexts—had a short public life when it addressed disquieting subjects. The creators of socially oriented painting and sculpture in the 1930s were hard pressed to find private patronage in America. Although both Noguchi's and Benton's lynching works remained unsold in the artists' collections, these men were willing to make humane statements in an arena where few were willing to become publicly involved.<sup>19</sup>

Another picture, painted in 1934 under the auspices of the Public Works of Art Project, was Samuel J. Brown, Jr.'s *The Lynching* (figure 4). Using a style bordering on caricature, Brown, an African American born and raised in North Carolina, left no doubt about his perspective on the subject. Brown had studied to become an art educator at the Pennsylvania Museum of Art. His clever adoption of a folk-like style to present a serious subject became the mark of his artistic work. Separated from the spectators on the ground, the hanged man in *The Lynching* and his viewing audience in the art gallery become one. The bracketing tree trunk and branches are patterned and positioned like a menacing reptile. The black man's incisors, bared as if about to bite down, are pointed, adding an animalistic quality to what we assume was an innocent man. Rather than a reflection of internalized self-hatred, the implied bestiality of the black figure provides commentary on prevailing white judgment of African Americans' subhuman status. Ironic details abound in this picture, but few saw beyond the



DIXIE HOLIDAY  
by William Mosby



THIS IS HER FIRST LYNCHING  
by Reginald Marsh



A LYNCHING  
by Thomas Benton

**Figure 3.** Illustrated catalog page from *An Art Commentary on Lynching*. Hale Woodruff Papers, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana.



**Figure 4.** Samuel J. Brown, Jr., *The Lynching*, 1934, watercolor and pencil on paper, 21 x 29 inches. Public Works of Art Project, on deposit at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

strangled, blue-gray face dominating the center of the frame. The deep pink droplets of blood escaping from the hanging body are suggestive of the smiling, upturned, pink faces of the dense crowd dotting the upper quarter of the picture, as if those droplets created them. A man's blood was shed so that they could live without fear? Countless crucifixion pictures include a ladder leaning against the cross. Although more subtle than others in his use of Christian references, Brown was not able to avoid them altogether. Even the dog tugging playfully at the end of the rope would fare better in life than a black man. Because of Brown's employment by the PWAP, he was free to purposely address a politically loaded, contemporary topic without solely considering its marketability. Subsequently, *The Lynching* can be counted among the large inventory of PWAP artworks that, as one museum official recently expressed it, "nobody wanted."<sup>20</sup> It was clear that, regardless of technical quality, some subjects (lynching probably ranking high on the list) remained unsuitable for expression through fine art. This picture was the boldest commentary to be made by an African American in *An Art Commentary*, but the intricacy of its message was lost in its somewhat heavy use of sarcasm. Winston Burdett described *The Lynching* in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*: "It is a decorative grotesque but not very violent, and preciousity [*sic*] is a little out of place in so urgent a subject."<sup>21</sup> Burdett was not alone in his opinion. Yet no critic appeared to be interested in commenting on Allan Freelon's *Barbecue—American Style*. This young black artist chose to depict "that moment when the victim first feels the flames begin to lick at his body."<sup>22</sup> The reverse of Brown's heavenly view, Freelon's victim is buckled up at the feet of his murderers. Not as artistically astute and lacking the calming effects of color, Freelon's drawing, ignored by the critics, was anything but precious.

*An Art Commentary* received modest news coverage, which tended to highlight the work of the more well-known white contributors: Benton, John Steuart Curry, George Bellows, and Reginald Marsh. Marsh's drawing, *This Is Her First Lynching* (see figure 3), was singled out for its more subtle handling of the subject, where his allusion to the sickness of a mob was enough to disturb most viewers. Remembered for his documentary style and biting clarity, Marsh painted New York in all its urban chaos. He favored the seedier side of life where the overlap of bodies crowded into small spaces made a powerful commentary on modern existence. *This Is Her First Lynching* (there are two fairly similar versions) was no exception. Although the crowd was decidedly made up of country folk, they appear to be dressed for a show and like the "great hives of people," as Marilyn Cohen described Marsh's characters, they continued to be "caught up in a period of national economic disaster, yet still pursuing their leisure or, like the Bowery bums, passing the time, endlessly waiting."<sup>23</sup> A well-educated and

financially secure illustrator, Marsh was beholden to none. In 1925, he became one of the original cartoonists for the *New Yorker*.<sup>24</sup> Like a skilled journalist, Marsh offers just enough detail to fuel the imagination. His detachment from the scenes he most enjoyed documenting was obvious. Marsh, living comfortably throughout his life, considered those less fortunate more inventive in their leisure. Lynching was entertainment from the standpoint of the enthusiastic mother holding her child overhead for a better view of the event. Marsh's matter-of-fact handling accentuates the macabre without overt condemnation. Viewer expectations are not met in this picture, and it is for that very reason that it was singled out by the critics as effective. Lacking literal interpretation, such objects invited sustained contemplation.

One standout example of this invitation to contemplate was William Mosby's *Dixie Holiday* (see figure 3). The intuitive style of this folk carver offered an unencumbered meditation on the helplessness of African Americans living in the South. Mosby, the only true black folk artist represented in the exhibition, was a sociology student at Virginia Union University when he carved *Dixie Holiday* out of a solid block of walnut. The sculpture was only about one foot in height, yet it received enthusiastic praise and was eventually purchased by the NAACP for its offices. The popularity of this carving was a reflection of the interest in Negro folk expressions taking hold during the 1930s. The contemporary careers of Horace Pippin and William Edmondson are well-known examples. It was believed that the untainted (read untrained) country artist could best access the true expression of the race. Mosby had never carved before, and it is unknown whether he continued with his art. Without formal training, he skillfully simulated a sense of powerlessness left in the wake of mob violence. In *Dixie Holiday*, the victim's family assemble under the tree like pawns in a chess game, wearing expressionless masks. The religious narrative, equally as subtle as Brown's more sophisticated technique, cannot be overlooked. The Madonna-with-child figure began the chain connecting this narrative to the life of Christ from birth to death. This was the general manner of the African-American artists represented in *An Art Commentary*. The steady quality of Mosby's vertical format and the static, self-contained forms created a quiet complacency—a kind of visual resignation—not conducive to emotional response. Pictures submitted by Hale Woodruff, Malvin Gray Johnson, E. Simms Campbell, and Wilmer Jennings, all African Americans, carried an identical tone. Each included allusions to Christianity coloring their compositions with what would be considered misplaced sentimentality. Stephen Alexander, writing for the *New Masses*, a radical leftist magazine, dismissed *An Art Commentary* as "so permeated by religious spirit as to be little more than prayer in graphic and plastic form."<sup>25</sup> The willingness to make a statement of powerlessness was present but not accompa-



nied by the ability to confront a white-dominated audience with black anger. This of course did not mean anger was altogether absent from the equation.

Alexander's opinion was a reflection of what was expected from art as social commentary. The exhibition was arranged to incite alarm and, with it, action to end lynching through legal channels. Not all visitors to the Newton Galleries went away unmoved. One reporter found a brave female visitor feeling faint while walking through the galleries. Another warned that "You may get a little ill, but it may do you good."<sup>26</sup> Even so, these objects were judged overall as watered down, mere artistic transcriptions of a horrid act, and therefore ineffectual as propaganda. It was apparently not considered possible or necessary for objects of artistic merit to be created under the rubric of lynching. Robert L. Zangrando allotted only a short paragraph to this exhibition in his useful and thorough text, *The NAACP Crusade against Lynching, 1909-1950*.<sup>27</sup> If, then, *An Art Commentary* failed at the levels of fine art and political propaganda, its works nevertheless vividly rendered the violent convergence of race, gender, and sexuality around the phenomenon of lynching.

The life of the mind played an important role in the creation, and in turn the reception, of these works. An artist unable to draw on personal visual experience to create a picture resorts to imagination. Paul Cadmus, an avowed atheist as well as an apolitical homosexual, revealed his opinion by picturing human interaction and intense facial expression. Cadmus created *To the Lynching!* (figure 5) specifically for *An Art Commentary*, using a swirl of fine lines to create a pileup of well-developed male anatomy. The resulting sensation was chaotic. According to Guy Davenport, to understand Cadmus we must recognize that "moral chaos is always shown in crowds" and "once sexuality of any kind becomes a herd activity, Cadmus sees it as vice, chaos, a failure of order and self-control."<sup>28</sup> Many of Cadmus's pictures are overtly sexual. *To the Lynching!* was no exception. Unlike the majority of works in *An Art Commentary*, Cadmus's figures physically interact with the victim's body, clawing his face and arms and touching his abdomen. By making the lynch mob resemble a pack of wolves about to devour their kill, Cadmus covertly implicated the odious nature of the assumption that "Negroes are prone to crimes against women and that unless a Negro is lynched now and then the women in the solitary farmsteads are in danger."<sup>29</sup> In other words, lynching was about correcting supposed sexual deviance, something Cadmus had a talent for picturing. *To the Lynching!* situates the viewer on top of the scene. We are drawn into the confusion, where the figures are disturbingly identical in color. Cadmus's willingness to pull the viewer in so close might be a sign of his awareness that the majority of those who would visit the exhibition would be white. The triangle of white men, in their freedom, are the ones to be feared. This picture frankly accuses its viewers



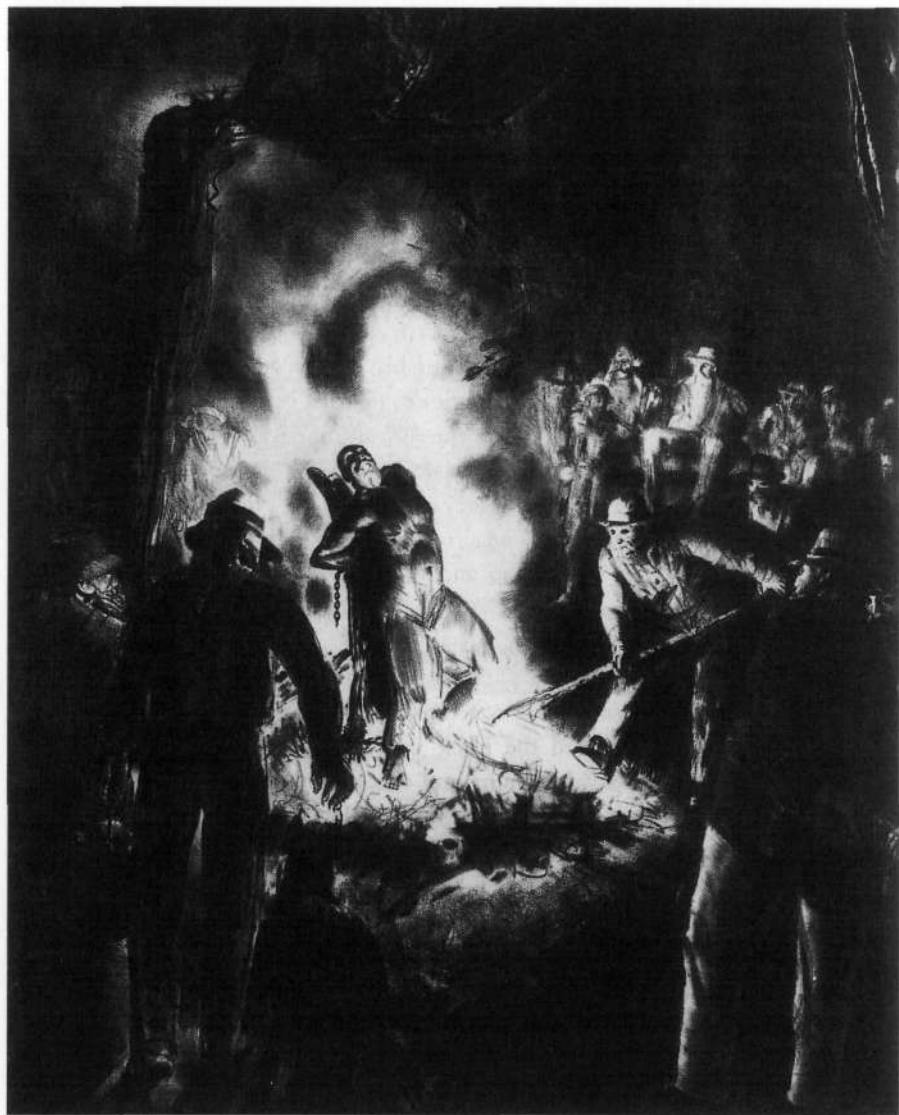
**Figure 5.** Paul Cadmus, *To the Lynching!* 1935, graphite and watercolor on paper, 20½ x 15¾ inches. Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, photograph © 1995, Whitney Museum of American Art.

as participants rather than putting them in sympathy with the victim or, as Benton and others had done, offering a safe distance from which to act as voyeurs.

It was common knowledge that the majority of lynchings of black men were justified by a call to preserve the safety and sanctity of white womanhood. Knowing this, we can recognize the influence of the sexual component behind the actual mutilation of African-American men as well as its depiction in some of the objects created by white artists.<sup>30</sup> Examples range from Jewish sculptor Aaron Goodleman's simple albeit subversive statement that the black man did not have a leg to stand on to the more involved narrative in George Bellows's lithograph, *The Law Is Too Slow* (figure 6).<sup>31</sup>

*The Law Is Too Slow* was the artistic seed that grew into *An Art Commentary*. Walter White used the lithograph for the jacket cover of his 1929 book *Rope and Faggot: A Biography of Judge Lynch*. However, this picture was originally made in 1923 to illustrate "Nemesis," a short story by Mary Johnston. The title of the piece was inflammatory enough, but the story could have fed the statistics on lynching: "They said that the man, a black man, had done the crime [attacking and murdering a white woman]. Perhaps he had, perhaps he had not. . . . One of the four men lighted the pile, the cane blazed up, and the night turned red and horribly loud—like hell."<sup>32</sup> While the black artist situates the victim on a journey to return to his God, the white artist condemns him to hell on earth. As an artist who embraced nineteenth-century academic tradition, Bellows called to mind works from that century that invoked images of violence and sexual aggression. The subjugated pale woman in art painted by artists from the French School of Romanticists such as Gérôme and Delacroix was replaced with a black man chained here as he was in slavery and glowing from the waist down as if lit from the inside. Rather than assuming the usual masculine position as viewer or active participant, the black man becomes the passive object viewed, the position generally held in art by a female. Bellows's artistic effort, tinged with erotic undertones, attempted to address the gruesome reality of castration of lynching victims but fell amazingly short of that reality. The African-American man in that picture was not presented as a man but a beast whom a national leader such as Woodrow Wilson openly designated as one in a "host of dusky children . . . insolent and aggressive, sick of work, [and] covetous of pleasure," safe in his belief that common consensus was behind him.<sup>33</sup>

The positioning of the black man as not only a victim but a restrained virile beast was not unlike portrayals of the devil in Western art. The seductive quality of "dark evil vanquished" underlying the more sensationalistic handling of the theme by Bellows and others was contrary to the cause of art meant to reflect



**Figure 6.** George Wesley Bellows, *The Law Is Too Slow*, 1923, lithograph. Gift of George F. Porter, 1925.1567, photograph © 1994, The Art Institute of Chicago. All rights reserved.

the spirit of antilynching propaganda. However distasteful, lynching has interwoven in its meaning issues of sexual morality that most American men could relate to on some level during that time. These sentiments—bound by fears of inadequacy—superimposed on lynching produced an antithetical brand of sa-

dism. Hence, we will find the use of black male bodies bound by rope reappearing later as erotica. The idea of manhood/personhood fades away as the black male body claims a space as object of desire.

The manhood of blacks was not an issue during slavery. For all intents and purposes, the slave remained a "boy" throughout his entire life. After the Civil War and emancipation, the African-American man was able to assume a position of masculinity, if only within his own ethnic community. The threat that he might have access to the acts and deeds of "men" was to become the catalyst for the emergence of new and vicious methods of keeping him in his "place." Many of these limitations have been confirmed in American visual arts. The dress and body language of the many anonymous black figures found across the entire historical spectrum of American art prior to the civil rights movement without a doubt reflected the inferior status of the African American.<sup>34</sup>

African-American artists creating works in the 1930s for polite society found it difficult to be as forthright as Cadmus, Bellows, or even Brown. In contrast, most African-American artists, unaccustomed to lashing out at the oppressor, preferred to focus on victimhood and those potential victims left behind. As mentioned earlier, their art possessed the tone of an appeal to the morality of the viewer, often through religious references. Richmond Barthé, a devout Roman Catholic of Louisiana Creole stock, had begun *The Mother* (figure 7) before *An Art Commentary* was conceived.<sup>35</sup> The sculptor emphasized the victim's mother and rendered the black man's body completely nude. Nudity heightened the figure's vulnerability and effected an allusion to familiar images of the crucified Christ while silently highlighting the barrenness of the black man's experience in America. But what is particularly unusual about *The Mother* was that Barthé left the lynched body intact. This was an unlikely state, because when a lynch victim was stripped he was customarily castrated as well. Castration, the literal feminizing of the so-called hypersexual black male, has been pointed out by Wiegman as a "violently homoerotic exchange" bringing out a subconscious white obsession with sexual parity as opposed to gender equality.<sup>36</sup> Further, it has been documented that the penis of the lynch victim became a valuable souvenir. Wiegman convincingly analyzed this practice: "In the image of white men embracing—with hate, fear, and a chilling form of empowered delight—the very penis they were so overdeterminedly driven to destroy, one encounters a sadistic enactment of the homoerotic, indeed its most extreme disavowal."<sup>37</sup> As a black man who openly preferred a homosocial life but never publicly revealed homosexual preferences, Barthé created a sculpture that served as a safe conduit for these closeted sentiments. It is obvious that Barthé meant to cloak a violent crime with the compositional grace and anatomical beauty of the famous Italian Renaissance model, Michelangelo's *Pietà*. But



**Figure 7.** Richmond Barthé, *The Mother*, 1934, painted plaster, approximately life-sized, destroyed 1940. Photograph from the National Archives, Washington, D.C.

failure to see beneath that cloak renders impotent the social and personal discourse at work in this object.

The religious configuration of art like Barthé's lamentation scene also points to a bold notion taking hold during the period that the son of God was a black man. This idea entered the art arena with works such as the subtle references to lynching in the illustrations by Charles Cullen for Countee Cullen's *Colors* in 1927, and again in 1929 when he published *The Black Christ*. In 1927, a small figure hanging limply from a tree in the background was enough to give an angry edge to an otherwise uplifting picture. By 1929, Cullen boldly created a checkerboard of repeated figures—black-lynched, white-crucified—until the figures begin to merge in the mind's eye. As bold as this work was for its time, *The Black Christ* cover, which introduced a fictional account of a lynching, did not compare to the audacity of Langston Hughes's language in his 1930 poem "Christ in Alabama." Hughes openly called Christ a "nigger" and paralleled his execution with that of a lynch victim. It was apparently easier for some black

writers to be forthright in expressing their sentiments on the subject. Most visual artists were using a talent still bound to notions of creating objects of beauty based on Euro-American standards. In 1935, black had not yet become beautiful.

Historically, the impressive strength and beauty of the black male body had not escaped the white artist's brush and chisel. As Michael Hatt has appropriately stated in his essay concerning masculinity and the representation of the black body in American art, "The savage is more animal than human and so clearly cannot be a man, not least because of his excessive sexual nature, lustful and unregulated by socialization."<sup>38</sup> Recognition and appreciation of the black body were given on a level of pure aesthetics excited by the "excessive sexual nature" of the "savage" having nothing to do with endowing blacks with any inherent human qualities.

Harry Sternberg's lithograph, sarcastically titled *Southern Holiday* (figure 8), accentuated the black body while commenting on the ruin of democracy by capitalism. Columns and smokestacks, obvious symbols of civilization and industrialization (offset by the small country church whose steeple the victim touches with his middle finger), also served as phallic symbols emphasizing the missing genitals severed from between the figure's spread legs. The artist recalled being "filled with anger and shame . . . and eventually transmitted these emotions through the finished print."<sup>39</sup> Although we recognize the expression of pain and anguish on the face of the bound figure, his expression does not carry the overall tenor of the picture. Sternberg returned to the lynching theme in 1937, removing the church, enlarging the figure, and obscuring the castration. The sexual language of the writhing, bound body projects a familiar, stereotypical, and hence more powerful message regardless of the symbols surrounding it.<sup>40</sup>

In general, the white artists were more willing to address the spectacle of the lynching act. From their perspective as white men, the artists could conceivably have empathized with the mob. Some of them used a clever compositional tool to avoid such a reading. Whether the use of this tool was a conscious act is unknown. John Steuart Curry's treatment of lynching is a clear example. A Midwesterner known for his sympathetic treatment of the African-American figure, Curry executed several versions of *The Fugitive* (see figure 1) with minor variances between them. Notice how the viewer and by implication the artist are placed outside the manhunt. Safely at a distance, we have a bird's-eye view beyond Curry's black figure gripping the tree branch with his toes like a monkey. Viewers were exempt from the event while being allowed to witness it vicariously. This was also the case with the examples by Benton, Bellows, and Sternberg discussed earlier. In each example, the victim was still alive, as if



Figure 8. Harry Sternberg, *Southern Holiday*, 1935, lithograph, 21¼ x 15¼ inches. Courtesy of Susan Teller Gallery.



rescue might still be possible. In contrast, the black artists more realistically depicted the deed as done.

Advocacy of antilynching legislation was inherent in the invitation to exhibit in *An Art Commentary*. Subtle or hidden symbolism factored into few of the works by white artists, while it was endemic for black artists. White artists fearlessly addressed the absurdities of lynching with the same open-faced audacity that their Southern brothers used to commit the crime. The lynch mob, a gathering usually so large that no single participant was punished, was in most cases addressed as existing out there somewhere beyond the civilized confines of the art gallery. With the exception of Peggy Bacon and Edmund Duffy, white artists willing to point a finger at specific individuals, details were left aside in favor of addressing the larger concern—the act itself. What lynching meant and why it continued to be practiced were thrashed around by a diverse group of artists in *An Art Commentary*. The particulars of lynching included an embarrassing array of perversities. The remnants of *An Art Commentary* are historical documents of a battle of wits between those who saw art as a medium of pleasure and those who wanted it to be an instrument of education.

The persistence of the lynching theme in visual art takes on a new character with the changing attitudes of art makers emerging after *An Art Commentary*. Within less than a decade, writer/photographer Carl Van Vechten, heralded as the enthusiast of the Harlem Renaissance, personal friend and champion of several black artists, and noted patron of *An Art Commentary*, could pose young Allen Meadows in the woods tied to a tree sporting the characteristic arrows of the Roman martyr Saint Sebastian between his legs (figure 9). Admittedly, reported incidents of lynching had all but disappeared by 1940, but did this make such blatant referral to it admissible for purely artistic reasons?<sup>41</sup> Once rendered passive, both in pose and by being a photograph, the black man was no longer an object of fear but one of desire, recalling what Kobena Mercer referred to as “classical racism [which] involved a logic of dehumanization[,] . . . bodies but not minds.”<sup>42</sup> Later in the decade, Geoffrey Holder created his untitled photograph of a muscular, dark-skinned torso with heavy-gauge rope cutting into its flesh.<sup>43</sup> Although the model was enveloped in darkness that rendered him anonymous, the mingling tones of sex and violence were unmistakable. The symbolism of lynching, even in the hands of a black artist, had been transformed out of the political realm. Does this mean that time heals all wounds?

Although the literal practice of lynching was eventually stamped out, it continues metaphorically with considerable power. Lynching, a festering sore in American history, has been alluded to by African Americans in reference to all levels of racial injustice. The language used to discuss the recent Thomas/Hill hearings is but one significant example. Lynching's political power as a visual



**Figure 9.** Carl Van Vechten, *Untitled*, 1942, black and white photograph. Carl Van Vechten Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Courtesy of the Estate of Carl Van Vechten, Joseph Solomon, executor.

tool has disintegrated steadily since *An Art Commentary* was dismantled in December 1935, when its national tour failed to materialize. The vision of a limp figure dangling from a branch had been branded on the American mind. The shock value was wasted on contemporary art audiences. Walter White had no idea how correct he was when he wrote in 1935 that "even a morbid subject can be made popular."<sup>44</sup> Both drawing us in and repulsing us with images evoking disturbing emotional responses, these works (a fraction of the number reflecting American interest in distressing themes) undeniably admit that art maintains a special place for human vice.

## NOTES

1. Jacques Seligmann, quoted in "Protests Bar Show of Art on Lynching," *New York Times*, February 12, 1935.
2. For a detailed account of the political underpinnings of this exhibition, see Marlene Park, "Lynching and Antilynching: Art and Politics in the 1930s," in *Prospects* (Center for American Cultural Studies, Cambridge University Press) 18 (1993): 311–65.
3. Southern Commission on the Study of Lynching, *Lynchings and What They Mean* (Atlanta: Commission, 1931), 61.
4. Southern Commission on the Study of Lynching, 63.
5. Robert L. Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade against Lynching, 1909–1950* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 122–38.
6. Letter to Mrs. George Bellows, December 13, 1934, from Walter White soliciting the use of her late husband's work. White mentions using the example of crusades for anti-prohibition, which swayed the opinion of "snooty society girls and others." NAACP Papers, Library of Congress.
7. A clearheaded approach to investigating the roots of violence against African Americans can be found in Herbert Shapiro, *White Violence and Black Response* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).
8. Park, 338.
9. Marlene Park numbers the exhibitors at forty-four, following the tally of the newspapers, but neglected to name them. The catalog listed thirty-seven names. It is quite possible that Isamu Noguchi was not the only name missing from the catalog, given the hasty manner in which the exhibition was put together.
10. Letter to Mrs. Harry Payne Whitney, December 13, 1934, NAACP Papers.
11. Robyn Wiegman, "The Anatomy of Lynching," in *American Sexual Politics: Sex, Gender, and Race since the Civil War*, ed. John C. Fout and Maura Shaw Tantiello (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 240.
12. Several quotes from the opening address can be found in "Art Goes Educational on Decorous East Fifty-seventh, Near Fifth," *New York Post*, February 18, 1935.
13. Photographs of lynching were taken as early as 1908 and began to be published

in major American magazines by the 1930s. *An Art Commentary* did not include photographs, although initially a ten dollar prize was slated for that medium. Photographs of lynching were seen as gruesomely explicit documents rather than art objects, and more often than not the photographer remained anonymous. The Whitney Museum of American Art's exhibition *Black Male* included *Accused/Blowtorch/Padlock* (1986) by Pat Ward Williams, which questions photographs of torture and why a photographer might not want to own up to being present at a lynching.

14. Bruce Altshuler, *Isamu Noguchi* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1994), 102.
15. Altshuler, 29.
16. Park, 32.
17. Matthew Baigell, *A Concise History of American Painting and Sculpture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), 321.
18. NAACP Papers.
19. Apparently, this painting was not favored by Benton. The canvas was left neglected in his leaky summer cottage and subsequently became damaged beyond repair. No color reproductions are known to exist. Letter to R. L. Zangrando from T. H. Benton, March 1963, in Zangrando, 254.
20. Anita Duquette, manager of rights and reproductions of the Whitney Museum of American Art, telephone conversation with author, February 9, 1995.
21. Winston Burdett, "Artists Call Attention to the Gentle Art of Lynching," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 15, 1935, NAACP Papers.
22. Letter to Walter White from Allan Freelon, undated, NAACP Papers.
23. Marilyn Cohen, *Reginald Marsh's New York* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1983), 1.
24. Cohen, 3.
25. Quoted in Park, 343.
26. Michel Mok, "Art Show Depicts Horrors of Mob Lynching Hysteria," *New York Post*, February 15, 1935, NAACP Papers.
27. Zangrando, 125–26.
28. Guy Davenport, *The Drawings of Paul Cadmus* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989), 9.
29. Southern Commission on the Study of Lynching, 42.
30. The two African Americans, Mosby and Richmond Barthé, who used complete nudity in their works depicted the male body intact.
31. Goodleman's truncated torso of polished, wood-stained ebony was made more powerful by his adaptation of carved, African representations of the body.
32. Mary Johnston, "Nemesis," *Century Magazine*, May 1923.
33. This statement was made in 1901 and is quoted in Earl Ofari Hutchinson, *The Assassination of the Black Male Image* (Los Angeles: Middle Passage Press, 1994), 11–12.
34. For a visually stimulating excursion of this kind, see Guy C. McElroy, *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art, 1710–1940* (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1990).

35. Although White courted Barthé heavily to have him exhibit in *An Art Commentary*, Barthé withheld the sculpture, preferring not to implicate himself in the political web of the NAACP program. *The Mother* was a centerpiece in his one-man show held in New York a few weeks after White's show closed.
36. Wiegman, 243.
37. Wiegman, 243.
38. Michael Hatt, "Making a Man of Him": Masculinity and the Black Body in Mid-Nineteenth-Century American Sculpture," *Oxford Art Journal* 15, no. 1 (1992): 21-35.
39. Sternberg, quoted in Park, 347.
40. The 1937 version, titled *The Lynching*, was reproduced in Alain Locke, *The Negro in Art: A Pictorial Record of the Negro Artist and of the Negro Theme in Art* (1940; New York: Hacker Art Books, 1968), 197.
41. Jessie D. Ames, *The Changing Character of Lynching: Review of Lynching, 1931-1941* (Atlanta: Commission on Interracial Cooperation, 1942).
42. Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 138.
43. This 1942 photograph was published in Geoffrey Holder, *Adam* (New York: Viking, 1986).
44. Letter to Mrs. Harry Payne Whitney.



# RACE

## CONSCIOUSNESS

**W**hat is the significance of race, blackness, and African-American culture in American society as America exits its first century without chattel slavery and enters its first century without legally codified segregation? Where does African-American studies fall amidst the growing academic interest in the politics of identity, and what insight do the lessons of the past hold for contemporary scholars in the discipline?

These questions and many others are addressed in *Race Consciousness*, a collection of original essays representing the latest work in African-American studies. In his entertaining introduction to the volume, Robin D. G. Kelley presents a startling vision of the state of African-American studies—and the world in general—in the year 2095. Nell Irvin Painter and Arnold Rampersad chart the different disciplinary and theoretical paths African-American studies has taken since the nineteenth century in their foreword to the volume. Individual sections of the book cover such topics as the culture of America as a culture of race, legacies of slavery and colonialism, crime and welfare politics, and African-American cultural studies. Bringing together an impressive range of new scholarship deeply informed both by the legacies of the past and current intellectual trends, *Race Consciousness* is a veritable “Who’s Who” of the next generation of scholars of African-American studies.

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